

FA18 Training and Readiness

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INTRODUCTION

The peacetime soldier's principal task is to prepare effectively for the next war. Consequently, he must anticipate the characteristics of the next war and conduct training applicable to future missions. This daunting task is made even more difficult when a force, such as the Marine Corps' F/A-18 Hornet community, is capable of performing a multitude of missions. F/A-18 squadrons arguably perform the widest spectrum of missions among the Marine Air Ground Task Force's (MAGTF) Air Combat Element (ACE). Many argue that as a result of the myriad of missions Hornet squadrons are required to prepare for, training programs for Hornet squadrons are stretched too thin.¹ If so, then the correlation can be made that F/A-18 pilots are inadequately prepared to support the MAGTF commander. However, careful examination of Marine Fighter Attack (VMFA) squadron mission statements, integrated Ground Combat Element (GCE)/ACE exercises, and VMFA training methodologies illustrate that, despite their diverse missions, the Marine Corps' F/A-18 squadrons enhance the MAGTF commander's warfighting options through focused, core capabilities based training.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, as operational tempo has increased and the nature of warfare has evolved, several arguments have been presented that suggest VMFA squadrons are ill-prepared to fulfill their MAGTF responsibilities. Since its introduction into the fleet, the Hornet's capabilities, and by extension those of its pilots, have been wrapped in controversy. For example, the F/A-18 was purchased in order to replace numerous, very specialized aircraft such as the F-4 and RF-4 Phantoms, A-6 Intruder, OV-10 Bronco, and A-4 Skyhawk. Although these aircraft were retired, their missions (Anti-Air Warfare, Close Air Support, Tactical Reconnaissance, FAC(A), etc.) were not and the Hornet alone has born the workload of a once robust tactical aviation fleet. Detractors have argued that one aircraft and pilot could not train and conduct the previously mentioned tasks with any accepted measures of proficiency.²

Others believe that the numerous capabilities of the F/A-18 are an obstacle to it being employed effectively because it is required to do too much. In the last five years alone, the Hornet has received numerous upgrades such as the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) and Joint Stand Off Weapon (JSOW), a Combined Interrogator Transponder

(CIT), digital datalink to Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System (AFATDS), and Link 16 just to name few. Proponents of a "back to basics" training philosophy suggest that the methods in which these upgrades and others are utilized indicate an attempt by Marine Aviation leadership to seek certainty through technology.³ The impact this has on TacAir training is that young pilots are taught a reliance on centralized control and execution rather than adherence to the principals revealed in MCDP-1 and MCDP-6.

Similarly, it has been discussed that Hornet squadrons have not realized their full potential as part of the Marine air-ground team. The explanation offered by those who support this point of view is twofold. They argue that first, an insufficient number of sorties are dedicated to training with ground forces, and that the bulk of training flights are focused on air-to-air missions rather than missions that directly support the GCE. Opponents of current training doctrine have even suggested that such misguided training could jeopardize the combat effectiveness of the MAGTF and the existence of Marine TacAir.⁴

WHAT EXACTLY CAN A HORNET DO?

In order to gain an understanding of the capabilities of Marine Hornet squadrons, one must first look at their mission statement. The Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron-1's (MAWTS-1) approved VMFA mission statement is to "Support the MAGTF Commander by destroying surface targets and enemy aircraft, day or night under all weather conditions during expeditionary, joint or combined operations."⁵ Admittedly, this statement is vague and leaves much to interpretation. However, a MAGTF commander can gain much insight into how his F/A-18s may be employed by examining the VMFA Mission Essential Task List (METL). The F/A-18 Training and Readiness (T&R) manual lists the VMFA METLs as:

- a. (UJTL TA 1.1.4) Conduct sea and air deployment operations
 - Maintain the capability to deploy and from naval shipping, advanced bases, and expeditionary airfields
 - Maintain the capability to conduct extended range operations employing aerial refueling
 - Perform organizational maintenance on assigned aircraft
- b. (UJTL TA 3.2.1) Conduct fire support
 - Conduct offensive anti-air warfare
 - Conduct offensive air support

- c. (UJTL TA 3.2.2) Conduct close air support
 - Conduct escort of friendly ground forces
 - Conduct assault support escort
- d. (UJTL TA 3.2.3) Conduct interdiction operations
 - Conduct armed reconnaissance
 - Conduct strike coordination and reconnaissance
- e. (UJTL TA 3.2.4) Conduct joint suppression of enemy air defenses
- f. (UJTL TA 3.2.8) Conduct air-to-air operations
 - Conduct anti-air warfare
 - Intercept and destroy enemy aircraft in conjunction with ground or airborne fighter control under all weather conditions
 - Conduct self escort and escort of friendly aircraft and ground forces
- g. (UJTL TA 3.3) Coordinate battlespace maneuver and integrate with firepower
 - Conduct combined arms coordination and control operations.⁶

The T&R manual gives quantitative guidance (type and number of sorties to be flown) as to how a squadron must train in order to fulfill each mission essential task. This facilitates standardization throughout the Marine Hornet community. The T&R manual further states "A core capable squadron is able to accomplish all tasks designated in the unit METL from a main base, expeditionary base, or carrier."⁷ Squadron Commanding Officers are held

accountable to higher headquarters via Status of Resources and Training (SORTs) reports. SORTs indicates the resources and training status required to undertake the full mission a unit was organized or designed to fulfill. Together, the T&R manual and SORTs provide the endstate to which a unit must train as well as the method for ensuring that the endstate is achieved. The manner in which a squadron incorporates T&R requirements into its daily operations is, in large part, left up to the individual squadron. Thus, the most common explanation for a squadron not achieving METL proficiency is due to its inability to reconcile real world requirements with training requirements.

INTEGRATED AIR/GROUND UNIT TRAINING: too much or not enough?

"Aside from Combined Arms Exercises (CAX) and supporting arms training exercises, there is little or no contact between ground combat units and fixed wing aviation units"⁸ writes one Hornet aviator in the Marine Corps Gazette. At first glance this appears to be true. Many F/A-18 pilots, especially those assigned to carrier squadrons, will not even attend a CAX during their first tour.

Nevertheless, examples of how the MAGTF skillfully integrates aviation fires with ground-based maneuver elements abound. For example, the battle for Inchon, the siege at Khe Sahn, and most recently, the 2nd Battle for Fallujah all come to mind. The air-ground success seen in these battles seems to cut against the argument that contact between ground and aviation combat elements during training is inadequate. In fact, these battles suggest that current integrated ACE/GCE training is, in fact, sufficient and that CAX and Tactical Air Control Party School do teach aviation and ground units how to decisively create the combined arms effect. Additionally, consider that during The Basic School, Expeditionary Warfare School, and Command and Staff College, Marine Officers from all MOS fields (not just aviation and infantry) have a variety of opportunities to impart their specialized knowledge to each other. The intangibles of resident PME for Officers cannot be dismissed when one assumes that contact between ground combat units and fixed wing aviation units is lacking.

Furthermore, additional integrated training for aviation units and GCE units is simply not necessary. Ground and aviation integration occurs through two distinct conduits; the first is the Air Officer and the second is the Forward Air Controller (FAC). The air officer, at

either the battalion, regimental, or division level ensures detailed integration of aviation capabilities (fires, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, command and control, etc.) during planning. He is also responsible for guiding as well as teaching his GCE commander about how the ACE should be employed, principally in the joint and deep fights. Conversely, the FAC is stationed at the lower echelons of command. His primary responsibilities are to educate company grade officers about marine aviation operations and facilitate the close and rear area fights. The manner in which Hornets are typically employed and the method of integration previously discussed allow Marine TacAir to train appropriately without extensive GCE involvement.

VMFA TRAINING: BIG F, little a

What does the MAGTF commander require from his aviation arm, specifically F/A-18 squadrons? The six functions of Marine Aviation provide some insight.

- Assault Support: Not directly provided by Hornets, however, Hornets do conduct escort.
- Anti-Air Warfare: Hornet is the sole provider within Marine Aviation.

- **Offensive Air Support:** Hornets and Harriers are primary providers of Deep Air Support, Hornet shares responsibility for Close Air Support with Harriers, Cobras, and Hueys.
- **Electronic Warfare:** Primarily supported by Prowlers, Hornets do provide reactive SEAD via the HARM.
- **Control of Aircraft and Missiles:** Hornets have no mission in this function.
- **Aerial Reconnaissance:** Initially supported by F/A-18D only, all F/A-18s now provide ISR via Litening and ATFLIR pods and datalink in addition to UAVs.

The greatest challenge presently faced by the Hornet community is training to so many missions with limited time, money, and personnel. Opponents of current training doctrine rely on the "Small Wars Manual" and "Airpower in Small Wars" in arguing that too much emphasis is placed on air-to-air training and that air to ground proficiency is sacrificed as a result.⁹ These publications indicate that there is little need for fighter aviation in a small war.^{10,11} Some go so far as to suggest that Marine Hornet squadrons should give up their air-to-air missions altogether. They urge that only specialized air to ground squadrons are capable of adequately supporting the MAGTF.¹²

Any discussion that suggests that Marine F/A-18s should give up, or stop training to their role as a fighter misses several salient points. Adherence to the T&R manual guarantees that training across the six functions of Marine Aviation will be conducted. Hornet pilots find themselves focusing disproportionately on a single mission often because their squadron training programs do not follow the guidance set forth in the T&R manual. Recall, the T&R manual is constructed to ensure proficiency of the mission essential tasks.

Many arguments about an inordinate focus on air-to-air training center around the Air Combat Tactics Instructor (ACTI) qualification. Because it is the most difficult qualification a Hornet pilot will earn, it is often perceived as the focal point for most training. Again, examination of the T&R manual proves that over the career of a Hornet pilot, this is not the case.

Additionally, Marine Aviation, particularly its TacAir, supports joint and combined commanders. These commanders depend on Marine Hornets to perform the missions defined in the Universal Joint Task List (UJTL).¹³ If F/A-18 squadrons fail to sufficiently train to their air-to-air role in addition to the others; they will be unable to function seamlessly in joint operations.

CONCLUSION

During the current conflict in Iraq the MAGTF commander has relied on his F/A-18s to provide offensive air support. Do we thus train only to fight the war we are currently engaged in or the one we anticipate next? The MAGTF prides itself on the ability to make a forcible, amphibious entry onto an adversary's beach. The MAGTF commander will need all six functions of Marine Aviation in order to do so, not just those he currently relies on. Emerging threats reinforce this position. An amphibious attack against a country such as Iran, which possesses 4th generation fighters like the F-14 and Mig-29 and integrated air defense assets like the I-Hawk and SA-5, will certainly require a robust air-to-air capability.

Through adherence to the training and readiness manual, integrated GCE/ACE exercises, and core capabilities based training, Marine Corps' F/A-18 squadrons will continue to enhance the MAGTF commander's warfighting options by flying not only air-to-surface missions, but air-to-air missions as well.

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Endnotes

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4. Shawn P. Callahan, "Refocus Marine TacAir," *Marine Corps Gazette* 5, no. 83 (1999): 51.
5. United States Marine Corps, *F/A-18A/C/D Training and Readiness Manual*, 2005, 3.
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